

The Voice of 'Middle England'? The Daily Mail and Public Life

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The Daily Mail was never content to be a passive spectator, merely reporting the activities of public life. From its launch, Northcliffe saw the paper as one that would make its views known and try to influence national decision-making processes: it would campaign for particular causes, champion individuals and organizations, expose poor performance or policy. This was justified on the basis that the paper was an important channel of public opinion – indeed, one that was arguably more responsive than politicians who were elected only every five years. 'Every extension of the franchise renders more powerful the newspaper and less powerful the politician', argued Northcliffe in 1903 (although this opinion didn't translate into his supporting votes for women).¹ In particular, the Mail presented itself as the representative of the respectable and hard-working middle-classes. We can identify three main themes in the Mail's interventions in public life: a consistent opposition to socialist or left-wing politics; support for a strong and internationally respected Britain, Empire and Commonwealth; and a social and cultural defence of 'family values', decency, and community spirit.

Party Politics

Northcliffe was essentially a Tory populist, while always seeking to retain some independence from party labels and structures. The Daily Mail tended to defend the political status quo, standing for a strong nation, monarchy and empire, and resisting radical reforms that would threaten established institutions or undermine capitalism. At the same time, it was frequently critical of the Conservative party, especially when it did not seem to be meeting the aspirations of the expanding middle classes that the Mail viewed as its key constituency.

Early twentieth-century politics was dominated by debates about the role of the state – how it should intervene in the economy, what responsibilities it had to its citizens, how it should tackle poverty. While the Liberal press supported the introduction of welfare measures (such as old age pensions and unemployment insurance), the Mail argued that the state's growth needed to be controlled for fear of extinguishing the competitive individualism that was supposedly the source of national greatness during the Victorian period. It articulated the anxieties of the propertied classes about a growing tax burden and the increasing organization of working-class trade unions, and suggested that only the Conservative party could be trusted to run the economy. The Mail fiercely opposed Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909, which was designed to raise taxation on the wealthy to pay for welfare measures, describing it as an 'audacious attempt to force socialism on the country without consulting the people.'²

If the Mail perceived reformist Liberals like Lloyd George as being politically dangerous, the fledgling Labour Party, committed to a fundamental overhaul of capitalism, potentially posed a far greater threat. The paper repeatedly portrayed the party as the tool of jealous and mean-spirited trade unions pursuing their own goals at the expense of the rest of society – a position from which it rarely deviated for the rest of the century. The Daily Mail's first detailed piece on the Labour party in 1906 suggested that Labour's policies 'must of necessity conflict with the organization of industrial enterprise' and would give the state an 'insane' power through 'an extension of the most evil features of the present system'.³ By 1910 the paper was highlighting Labour's 'campaign of class hatred and plunder'. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 only intensified fears of the 'Red Peril', and the Mail did much to feed these anxieties, especially when Rothermere, Northcliffe's brother, became proprietor after Northcliffe's death in 1922. The high point of the socialist scare came days before the 1924 General Election, when the Daily Mail published the notorious 'Zinoviev letter' under the sensational headline 'Civil War Plot by Socialist Masters'. This forged letter, purporting to be from Comintern chief Grigory Zinoviev to the Communist Party of Great Britain, offered financial backing for revolutionary activity; the fact

¹ S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume 2, The Twentieth Century* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 12.

² *Daily Mail*, November 1909, cited in J. Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe, Press Baron in Politics 1865–1922* (London: John Murray, 2000), p. 180.

³ *Daily Mail*, 17–18 January 1906, cited in James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.8

that MacDonald's Labour Government had not taken any action to counter this unwelcome foreign intervention indicated, in the Mail's eyes, that Labour were beholden to the Communists.⁴ This dramatic revelation, the culmination of weeks of stories attempting to associate Labour with extremism, helped to produce the highest voter turnout at a general election in the inter-war period, and, although the Labour vote actually increased, the fears of socialism encouraged by the Mail may have driven some former Liberal voters into the arms of the Conservatives. The result was a crushing majority for Stanley Baldwin's Conservatives.

Rothermere was soon disillusioned by Baldwin's 'semi-socialist' administration, however, and lacking Northcliffe's attachment to the political mainstream, he increasingly cast admiring eyes at Benito Mussolini, Italy's Fascist leader. An article penned by Rothermere in May 1927 lauded Mussolini as 'The Leader Who Saved Italy's Soul', while less than a year later Rothermere announced that he was 'the greatest figure of our age', adding that he was 'proud of the fact that the Daily Mail was the first newspaper in England, and in the world outside Italy, to give the public a right estimate of the soundness of his work'.⁵ After the Labour party's victory in the 1929 election, Rothermere believed that he had the power to push the Conservatives in a new direction. He assured Beaverbrook, the proprietor of the Daily Express, that 'You and I have the situation entirely in our hands. Without our active support, there is not the remotest chance of the ex-Premier [Baldwin] and his group of intimates returning to office.'⁶ The Mail joined the Express in a high-profile 'Empire Free Trade' campaign: this was an attempt to cure Britain's political and economic ills by strengthening the ties of empire, most notably by creating a tariff wall around the British dominions and colonies to encourage greater trade within. The papers formed the United Empire Party and started running candidates against the Conservatives in by-elections. This was the most direct challenge yet posed by the press barons and their popular papers to the political system, and in the spring of 1931, it seemed that Baldwin was at risk of being toppled from the Conservative Party leadership. He survived only by focusing disquiet on the undemocratic ambition of the press barons themselves, delivering in March 1931 the famous lines, penned by his cousin, Rudyard Kipling, that Beaverbrook and Rothermere were seeking 'power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot down the ages'. The speech was enough to derail the Empire Free Trade bandwagon, and marked the end of the most hubristic ambitions of the press barons.

The increasingly gloomy Rothermere responded by taking the Mail further out of the political mainstream. On 19 October 1933, the paper published an exclusive, and sympathetic, interview that the journalist G Ward Price had conducted with Adolf Hitler. In 1934, Rothermere declared 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts' and called on the British public to support Oswald Moseley's British Union of Fascists (BUF; describing Italy and Germany as 'beyond all doubt the best-governed nations in Europe today').⁷ While open propagandizing for the BUF lasted only six months before differences of opinion forced a split, Rothermere and the Mail did little to conceal their continued approval of Hitler and Mussolini's domestic policies.⁸ The Mail's idiosyncratic politics were becoming less appealing to the mainstream public, and its circulation stagnated while that of its moderate Conservative competitor, the Daily Express, rocketed.

After Rothermere's death in 1940, the Mail settled into a quieter political role as a consistent, but critical, supporter of the Conservatives. Rothermere's son, Esmond, had been Chairman of Associated Newspapers since 1932 and now took full control of the paper, but he lacked the journalistic flair and political dynamism needed to recapture the glory years of Northcliffe. Frustrated by the Mail's failure to keep pace with the Express, the second Viscount Rothermere kept replacing the editor, but this high turnover just made it harder for the paper to develop a distinctive voice.⁹ It was under the editorship of David English from 1971 that the Mail started to reassert itself on the political stage. The paper became a committed supporter of Thatcher,

⁴ *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1924, p.9.

⁵ *Daily Mail*, 2 May 1927, p. 10; 28 March 1928 p. 10.

⁶ House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook Papers, C/284a, Rothermere to Beaverbrook, 5 July 1929.

⁷ *Daily Mail*, 15 January 1934, p.10

⁸ Rothermere and Mosley's public exchange of letters (printed in the *Daily Mail* 14 July 1934) signalled the end of the relationship: see M. Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate', *Historical Journal*, 41/2 (1998), pp. 529–42.

⁹ S. J. Taylor, *The Reluctant Press Lord: Esmond Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998).

vigorously attacking Labour and the trade unions during the 1979 election campaign. On 24 April 1979, under the front page headline 'Labour's Dirty Dozen', the paper exposed the '12 Big Lies' the party was using to try to discredit the Conservatives: many of these 'lies' – such as the claim that Margaret Thatcher would double VAT – were subsequently shown to be pretty close to the truth.¹⁰ During the 1983 election campaign, the paper was so partisan in its support for Thatcher that the journalists' union chapel requested that other parties be given fairer coverage.¹¹ After Thatcher was deposed in 1990, the Mail's support for the Conservatives became more muted, but despite the attempts of Tony Blair's New Labour to woo the paper – and indeed the appearance of the third Lord Rothermere on the Labour benches of the House of Lords in 1997 – it remained faithful to its right-wing traditions.



Mrs Margaret Thatcher reading the Daily Mail following her victory in the Conservative Party leadership election, 5 February 1975

Britain and the World

One of the most characteristic features of the early Daily Mail was its support for British imperial power. Kennedy Jones, Northcliffe's right-hand man when establishing the paper, recalled how they 'discovered at once an abounding desire for knowledge on all matters affecting the Empire. We realized that one of the greatest forces, almost untapped, at the disposal of the Press was the depth and volume of public interest in Imperial questions.'¹² The paper accordingly declared itself 'the embodiment and the mouthpiece of the Imperial idea'.¹³ Patriotic coverage of the Boer war took the Mail's circulation above 1 million copies for the first time, and Jones encouraged the paper to devote 'at least double the amount' of space previously thought necessary to record colonial events and the courageous exploits of British pioneers.¹⁴ In November 1904, the paper established a weekly Overseas Edition of the Mail to 'strengthen the bonds of empire'; it also organized an Overseas Club pledged to defend the 'greatest Empire in the world'.¹⁵ Able-bodied men were encouraged to learn how to bear arms; the final lines of the club's motto implored members to 'Pray God our greatness

¹⁰ R. Greenslade, *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* (London: Macmillan, 2003), 362-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

¹² K. Jones, *Fleet Street and Downing Street* (London: Hutchinson, 1920), p. 146.

¹³ *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1900, cited in Thompson, *Northcliffe*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Jones, *Fleet Street*, p. 147.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Northcliffe*, p. 118.

may not fail through craven fears of being great.¹⁶ Before 1914, the paper frequently warned of the growing menace of Germany and led the campaign for an expansion of Britain's naval strength.

Once war broke out, Northcliffe's intense patriotism and restless energy saw the Mail constantly pushing Britain's leaders to prosecute the war more vigorously and effectively (see 'Daily Mail and the First World War'). Having defeated Germany, the Mail argued that the best way of avoiding further conflict was to preserve the Empire's armed capability while avoiding unnecessary extra entanglements. International institutions, such as the newly-formed League of Nations, were viewed with considerable scepticism. This was because patriotic feeling could only be mobilized for the purposes of Empire: 'no sane youth burns to guarantee a system which would throw British manhood into the trenches to safeguard San Salvador or some other League member whose frontiers only school teachers know'.¹⁷ National strength was deemed far more important, and in 1935 the Mail established and publicized a National League of Airmen, to encourage 'a rapid advancement in our air force strength'.¹⁸ The Mail was a firm supporter of Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler's Germany in the late 1930s, but always on the basis of continuing to build up British military capacity at the same time. Ultimately war could not be avoided, and the Mail threw itself behind the Churchill administration with its usual patriotism. Herbert Mason's front-page photograph of St Paul's rising unscathed from another night of German aerial bombardment became one of the iconic images of the war.¹⁹



St Paul's Cathedral during the bombing of London ('The Blitz'), 31 December 1940

¹⁶ British Library, Northcliffe Papers, Add. MS 62222, Fos. 91–92, circulars from Evelyn Wrench, 27 Aug. 1910, Nov. 1910.

¹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 15 December 1936, 10.

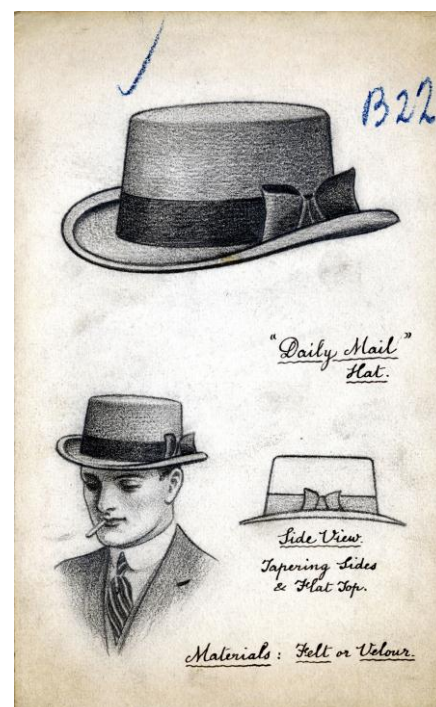
¹⁸ P. Addison, 'Lord Rothermere and British Foreign Policy', in C. Cook and G. Peele, (eds.), *The Politics of Reappraisal* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 200–1; Taylor, *The Great Outsiders*, 309.

¹⁹ *Daily Mail*, 31 December 1940, p. 1.

After 1945, the Mail was forced to accept Britain's declining international role and the end of Empire. Nevertheless, it consistently supported the military interventions that British governments deemed necessary: at Suez in 1956, in the Falklands in 1982, in Iraq in 1990 and 2003. The focus of its campaigning increasingly turned to Britain's relationship with Europe. Despite supporting the entry into the European Common Market in 1973, the paper became increasingly doubtful of the benefits of closer integration, and highlighted the dangers of ceding power to bureaucratic and unresponsive European institutions. The Mail labelled the 1997 General Election a 'Battle for Britain', and argued that 'nothing less is at stake than the freedom of Britain as a self-governing nation'. It feared that the Labour Party's enthusiasm for a federal Europe would encourage it to 'abolish the pound' and join the single currency; it argued that the Conservatives 'will more vigorously defend Britain's interests against Brussels'.²⁰ The paper's passion on this issue remains undimmed, and it continues to be one of the most influential voices of Euroscepticism.

Society and Culture

Northcliffe's insistence that the Daily Mail encompass all aspects of life, rather than just the elevated business of politics and international affairs, ensured that the paper made a broad range of interventions in British social and cultural life. Some of these were light-hearted stunts designed to attract publicity and entertain readers, such as the competition to design a new hat in 1920, the search for the Loch Ness Monster in the 1930s, and Ralph Izzard's hunt for the Yeti in the early 1950s. (Photographs of 'Nessie', and a possible Yeti footprint, were joyfully printed on the front page.) Other campaigns, such as the promotion of wholemeal bread in 1911, had more serious intent. One of the most important of these was the publicity given to one of the twentieth century's most notable inventions: the aeroplane. Immediately captivated by the 'aerial motor' car, in 1906 Northcliffe offered a £1000 prize for the first person to fly across the English Channel, and £10,000 for a completed flight from London to Manchester. He was delighted to award both within five years, and continued to invest heavily in publicizing and sponsoring the latest innovations in aeroplane technology.²¹

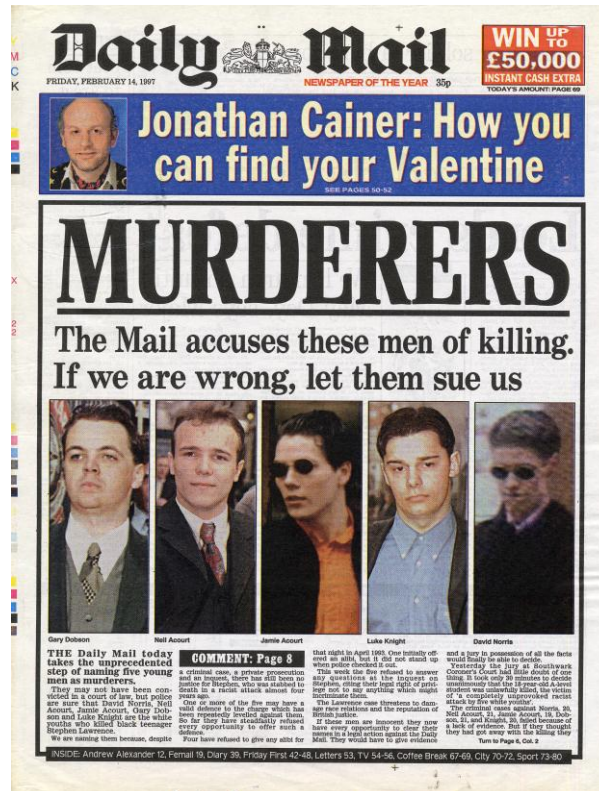


Left: Food and supplies for Daily Mail Himalayan Expedition to find the Yeti, 28 December 1953
Right: Mr Albert Owen Hopkins won the Daily Mail hat competition in 1920 with his design, the Sandringham Hat.

²⁰ Margaret Scammell and Martin Harrop, 'The Press', in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997), p.168.

²¹ S. J. Taylor, *The Great Outsiders: Northcliffe, Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London: Phoenix, 1996), pp. 119–127.

In more recent years, the Mail campaigned vigorously to keep the case of Stephen Lawrence, a black British teenager killed in a racist attack in South London in 1993, in the public eye. Despite the Crown Prosecution Service's inability to bring charges, and the failure of a private prosecution, the paper on 14 February 1997 boldly accused the five suspects on its front page with the headline 'Murderers: The Mail accuses these men of killing. If we are wrong, let them sue us'. The Mail's stance was vindicated in January 2012 when two of the suspects were convicted of the murder.



The men accused of murdering Stephen Lawrence in a racist attack in South London in 1993

Amid the varying targets of its diverse campaigns, the Mail has consistently supported what it perceives to be the moral and cultural preoccupations of the respectable middle classes. It has defended marriage and 'family values' against the threats of 'permissiveness' and moral 'relativism'; it has argued for a tax and welfare system that rewards hard work and saving, and it has robustly criticized 'scroungers' and 'immigrants' who take advantage of the system. When it has been under the direction of proprietors and editors in sympathy with those values, and with the journalistic ability to communicate them forcefully to its target audience – that is to say, during the Northcliffe years, and then in recent decades under David English and Paul Dacre – the paper has proven itself to be an unrivalled voice of 'middle England'.

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